

## ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

Turkey and the EU:  
Time to Break the Stalemate**Dimitar Bechev** Senior Policy Fellow, Head of Sofia's office, ECFR

On 1 February 2011, as mass protests swept through Cairo, Alexandria and Egypt's other large cities, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broadcasted a speech on the waves of the NTV channel. Unlike his homologues in Western Europe or indeed within the Obama administration, the Turkish leader had few qualms in taking the side of the anti-Mubarak demonstrators. He delivered a robust message, steeped in religious and moralist overtones, to the Egyptian dynast: "You must be the first to take a step for Egypt's peace, security, and stability [...] Take steps that will satisfy the people". For Erdoğan, the upheaval was much more than Egypt's internal affair:

*Turkey is playing roles that can upturn all the stones in the region and that can change the course of history. My dear brothers, we are pursuing a foreign policy with character. Turkey is saying no to the oppressors. It is challenging what was blindly accepted until now. It is calling the murderers murderers. It is destroying taboos. Turkey is saying wait a minute to those who condemn others to poverty and to blockades. Turkey is shouting the truth and the just at every opportunity. Turkey is positing a strong will to help peace, stability, tranquillity, democracy, universal law, rights and freedoms to prevail in its region. We represent a mentality that seeks for its brothers whatever it wants for itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Mubarak left, swept by the wave of popular discontent. Erdoğan soon found himself delivering a similar message to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, while urging Western powers to show restraint in enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya. Next in line was Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, who in March 2011 was asked by Turkey to lift the state of emergency dating back to 1963, embark on political reform, and defuse tensions sparked by pro-democracy demonstrations in Deraa and Latakia. The punch line: ride the wave of democratisation or be swept by it.

Those following Turkey will see a U-turn in its foreign policy. Just a few years ago, Turks left, right and centre reacted with opprobrium to suggestions of their country being a model for

1. A translation of the speech is available at : <http://mideastwire.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/erdogans-cairo-speech-birthpangs-of-a-new-middle-east-as-obamas-cairo-moment-fades/>

the Arab-speaking Middle East, dear to the neo-cons around former President of the United States (US) George W. Bush. Since the 1920s, the Turkish Republic – meaning primarily the bureaucratic and military establishment – saw itself as a Western outpost, fundamentally different from the lands further south. Despite talk of commercial expansion embraced as early as the 1980s, during the years of Prime Minister (later President) Turgut Özal, in Istanbul and Ankara the image of the Middle East was not very different from the stereotypes prevalent in the West. To the median citizen, Iran and the Arab world evoked associations with religious extremism, authoritarian habits, cultural backwardness, stagnant economies and myriads of threats to Turkey's cherished national security.

But after nearly a decade under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), Turkey is no longer an outsider or a passive observer of events beyond its frontiers. It is now actively pursuing a leadership role, leveraging its economic weight and newly-discovered soft power through political engagement in regional hotspots such as Iran, Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq – and now Egypt, Libya and, most significantly, Syria. Back in May and June 2010, Turkey's new neighbourhood policy put it on a collision course with erstwhile ally Israel and later, when Ankara opposed sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council, with the US and the European Union (EU).

Of course, after the NTV speech, domestic critics of the AKP did not miss the opportunity to lambast Erdoğan's double standards. Back in 2009, the prime minister was quick to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmedinejad over his "victory" in the Iranian presidential elections, ignoring mass demonstrations staged by the pro-reform Green Movement on the streets of Tehran. As with any foreign policy, that of new Turkey has to strike a tenuous balance between high principles and hard facts and interests. The country's foreign policy reflects in equal measure a strategic calculus and the ideological commitments of the AKP.

Yet, Turkey's involvement in the revolutionary upheavals of Egypt (and also Tunisia, where the country's founding father Habib Bourguiba once held Kemal Atatürk as a role model) points to a new reality. As ECFR's recent report, "The Spectre of Multipolar Europe", argued, Turkey has now transformed from a periphery of the West to a centre of its own world, which includes the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Black Sea. It is imperative that the EU wakes up to this reality and, pun aside, re-anchor Ankara's neighbourhood policy with a renewed strategic partnership.

## EU-Turkey: momentum lost

Turkey's rising political clout is partly due to Turkey's advanced relationship with the EU – the Customs Union completed in 1996 and the accession negotiations that kicked off back in 2005. At the same time, neighbourhood activism dramatically recasts Turkey from being a *demandeur*, a role played in earnest since the 1999 Helsinki Summit granted the country

candidate status, to being an independent power pole with which the EU and the US must now reckon. This about-face has to do with both a sense of betrayed promises shared by the AKP government and a majority of Turkish citizens, and, at a deeper level, the "Turkey's-only-friend-is-another-Turk" mentality deeply ingrained in Turkey's national political culture.

It is crystal clear that the EU and Turkey are now facing a critical point in their relationship. For some time, the Union has been pretending to be negotiating on membership with Ankara while Ankara has been pretending to be taking Brussels seriously. This façade is beginning to crumble and 2010 showed more than one crack. In contrast to years past, in November 2011 few bothered to read the regular monitoring report issued by the European Commission.

Turkey remains a profoundly divisive issue for the EU. The EU collectively blocks eight chapters over Ankara's refusal to implement the 2004 Additional Protocol to its Association Agreement with the European Community (EC) and over its refusal to open ports and airports to Greek Cypriot ships and aircraft. Germany and France have been openly opposing accession, arguing instead for a form of "privileged partnership". (Although, in all fairness, due to a concession made to the junior coalition partner, the Free Democrats, Germany is still formally in favour of Turkish membership). President Nicolas Sarkozy declared that "Turkey is a great civilisation, but not a European one". Tacitly encouraged by Berlin and Paris, Cyprus continues to block negotiations on six further chapters. Former blocker-en-chief Greece is also changing its position, from a supporter to a bystander, due to the persistence of hard-security issues in the Aegean, but more importantly because of the painful economic crisis it has been enduring, which drastically narrows Athens' scope for foreign policy entrepreneurship at the EU level. The pro-accession camp includes the United Kingdom, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Italy and most Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, including neighbouring Bulgaria and Romania.

The end result is a stalemate in membership negotiations. In the first half of 2010, the Spanish Presidency declared its ambition to start talks on three new chapters in the first half of the year, but on 29 June only the Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy (Chapter 12) was opened. There are only three further chapters that remain not "frozen". Unless the EU starts trading directly with North Cyprus, Turkey refuses to implement the 2004 additional protocol to the Ankara Agreement and open its ports and airspace to Greek Cypriot ships and aircraft. The regulation proposed by the European Commission to that effect has been blocked in the European Parliament, which in turn gives Ankara few incentives to reconsider its position and put pressure on Cyprus to lift the vetoes. After the election of Derviş Eroğlu, a hardliner, as president of unrecognised North Cyprus in April 2010, there is a widely shared sense that a window of opportunity for the ongoing unification talks has been closed.

Compared to the 2002-2006 period, the golden era of the EU's "transformative power" in Turkey, the Union has all but lost its leverage. Diplomats in Ankara may talk the EU talk, but Brussels was not a reference point in the ill-fated "Kurdish Opening", embarked upon by the AKP in

late 2009, nor in the constitutional referendum of 12 September, 2010, which rocked Turkey's domestic scene. Even without formal negotiations on the relevant chapters, the Turkish government is insisting that it is nevertheless implementing the *acquis*, but there is little evidence to support this. Time is running out. The EU is heading into a crisis at a time when the Middle East and North Africa are undergoing tectonic shifts unseen for two generations or so.

## The regional dimension

In the wake of the flotilla incident and the Iran vote, pundits on both sides of the Atlantic, but mainly in Washington, were anxiously asking “who lost Turkey”. Former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates observed that the country was “pushed by some in Europe refusing to give Turkey the kind of organic link to the West that Turkey sought”. Of course, reality is more complex. The EU remains a pole of attraction, yet Ankara is diversifying its economic and political relations. Back in October 2010, *The Economist* captured this sense of shifting positions in its special report entitled “Anchors Aweigh” (paradoxically, a heading evocative of America's military ascendancy). In a way, Turkey is behaving rationally, keeping all its options open. Turkey is not an issue, as the EU believes, but a full-fledged actor. The three principal pillars of Turkey's activist foreign policy are (1) mediating in regional hotspots, from Lebanon to Bosnia; (2) acting as a catalyst for economic integration, and (3) as the reaction to the recent events Egypt demonstrate, projecting a model for political and socio-economic development.

While the three elements are interlinked, Turkey's success as a peacemaker and mediator has been at best qualified. On the one hand, Turkey has managed to dramatically improve its relations with neighbours, in line with the “zero-problems” doctrine enunciated by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in the days he was a university professor. The most clear-cut example of this can be found in Turkey's relations with neighbouring Syria, which was at the verge of war with Turkey in 1998. Now the two governments enjoy an excellent relationship with good contacts at all levels and a number of joint economic projects. Most recently, this includes a high-speed rail service between Aleppo and Gaziantep in Turkey. Encouragingly, Ankara has cultivated strong commercial and political ties with the Kurdistan Region in Northern Iraq, opening a consulate in Erbil in March 2010. AKP has also strengthened its links with Tehran, thanks to diplomatic support on the nuclear dossier as well as a number of joint energy projects dating back to the 1990s.

Yet, things look different with regard to Turkish ambitions to act as an intermediary. Before the 2008-2009 Gaza conflict, Ankara sought to exploit its advantageous position *vis-à-vis* both Israel and Syria and act as a go-between in bilateral negotiations. This is no longer in the cards as Turkey has effectively taken a side and chosen to openly confront Israel. In Iraq, Nuri al-Maliki managed to put together a coalition even though Ankara backed the rival Ayad Allawi bloc. Despite success in mediating between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (primarily the Bosniak parties), Turkey has limited leverage over Republika

Srpska, one of the two entities in the common state, while its preferred candidate for the tripartite Bosnian Presidency, Haris Silajđić, lost to Bakir Izetbegović in the general elections held in October 2010. As no Bosniak politician can afford not to have Turkey's backing, Izetbegović is now friends with Ankara. Because of Azerbaijani opposition and lack of progress in Nagorno-Karabakh, agreements concluded with Armenia cannot be ratified in Ankara and Yerevan.

Turkey has fared much better as an agent of “economic integration”. In 2010, it pushed for facilitation of free movement of people and trade liberalisation with Arab neighbours. On 3 August, a quadripartite free trade agreement (FTA) was concluded with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, followed by a bilateral FTA with Lebanon on 25 November. In January, Turkey and Lebanon agreed to abolish visas, following similar deals with Syria and Jordan. Yemen was next in line with a bilateral agreement concluded in early 2011. The initiatives replicate the EU's functional integration model, while Turkey's appeal is closely related to its advanced integration in the EU market. Experts now quip about the advent of Sham-gen (referring to Sham, the Arabic name of the Levant) to replace Schengen. However, softening borders with the Middle East comes at a price. In January, Turkey and the EU agreed on the wording of a readmission agreement. But Ankara refused to sign as the Union declined to grant it a visa liberalisation roadmap on the model that had been implemented in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, the near-crisis on the Greek-Turkish land border in Thrace in 2010 has fueled fears that Turkey is a gateway for illegal migrants sweeping into Western Europe from Africa and Asia.

Nowhere has the power of the trading state been as visible as in relations with Russia, with bilateral exchanges worth €25.6 billion in 2008, prior to the economic downturn. In 2010, there was a strong recovery. Every year, more than 3 million Russians travel to Turkey for business or tourism, with the number projected to grow even further thanks to a visa-free deal. Energy is a key bilateral issue as imports from the north are essential for meeting demand from the ever expanding Turkish economy. During a visit on 8 June, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin unveiled, together with Erdoğan, a joint plan to build a nuclear power plant near the city of Mersin. Furthermore, Russia is a significant market for Turkey's globalised construction sector.

Finally, but perhaps most significantly, Turkey has gained credibility as “a source of inspiration”, if not a model, for its neighbours, immediate and more distant. Ankara's soft power boils down to a demonstration effect in Muslim-majority countries to the south and to the east. The core message aired by the AKP brand is that one can embrace modern lifestyles, democracy and the capitalist marketplace while remaining true to pious principles. A very potent channel for conveying this message is Turkish popular culture, which commands a large following in the Arab world, Iran and the Balkans. Parallels with other actors espousing political Islam elsewhere in the region may be deceiving, yet present-day Turkey offers an alternative to both sclerotic authoritarian regimes and the radical, anti-Western Islam preached by the global jihadis.

## The way forward?

EU policymakers should strive to engage meaningfully with the new Turkey, which is both more democratic and less prone to follow the West. Ankara is a potential partner not only in Egypt and Tunisia, but also in the Western Balkans, Iraq, the Southern Caucasus, and hopefully in Palestine and Lebanon. Yet, the EU has failed to integrate Turkey in frameworks such as its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The negotiation chapter on CSDP is still unopened and is very likely to be vetoed by Cyprus. Turkey keeps itself at an arm's length from the ENP, which it sees as an alternative track to accession – even though Turkey is the physical link between the policy's eastern (post-Soviet) and southern (Middle East and North Africa) branches. Turkey is a key ally in the effort to diversify energy supplies to the EU, especially given strategic projects such as the Nabucco gas pipeline. Yet the negotiation chapter on energy is still to be opened and Turkey has not started full-blown alignment with the *acquis* in this field.

What the EU needs is a parallel track for strategic dialogue with Turkey on regional issues of common concern. The dramatic events in Egypt present a perfect opportunity for coordinated action or, at the very least, close collaboration and structured exchange of views and ideas. Amongst other benefits, such a dialogue will give credibility to the nascent European External Action Service (EEAS) headed by Vice-President of the European Commission / High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton. Turkey's clout in the Middle East is in no small part related to its privileged ties to the club of rich and democratic countries that is the EU. Conversely, the EU would benefit in its dealings in the region if it acts together with a country whose stocks are hitting a high, especially in the eyes of societies. Such cooperation could be replicated in other settings, such as in Bosnia or in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Such strategic dialogue will complement rather than cancel the ongoing accession talks that have fallen prey to the Cyprus conflict and the current phase of EU introspection. Foreign policy cooperation on issues that pose a common challenge is the pragmatic way out of the deadlock and a means to inject more trust in the deteriorating bilateral relationship. Contrary to popular belief, Turkey still needs the EU as an ally as much as the EU needs Turkey. We have yet to see whether leaders on both sides will seize the opportunity.